Was CIA killer double agent for Castro?

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By GEORGE CRILE
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WASHINGTON — AM Lash is the code name the Central Intelligence Agency gave the senior Cuban official it had recruited in 1961 to kill Fidel Castro.

The agency's dealings with this hired killer, which continued up to a disastrous end in 1965, encompassed the longest-standing and, on the surface, the most likely to succeed of its numerous plots on Castro's life. It therefore seems remarkable that the Senate intelligence committee, in its investigation of the CIA's assassination activities, passed so lightly over this critical chapter.

To begin with, any examination of AM Lash's history would suggest that he was too close to insanity to be relied on. And from this a larger question presents itself. Was AM Lash actually a double agent for Castro, or was he so emotionally manipulable that he provided an equivalent service?

And if so, and if Castro had become convinced that the United States would stop at nothing to kill him, could Castro have felt compelled to strike first?

AM Lash has never been publicly named. But Cuban exiles in Miami have identified him as Rolando Cubela, a Cuban doctor, a former "commandante" of the rebel army, and an intimate of Castro.

The CIA persuaded the Senate intelligence committee not to identify Cubela, who is now in jail in Cuba, maintaining that alerting the Cubans to his role in early CIA plots would expose him to reprisals.

Fled with treasury

But this argument is specious — it is difficult to believe that Cubela now has any secrets from his captors.

To understand Cubela fully, it is necessary to introduce a Cuban exile in Miami, Jose Aleman.

During the 1940s, Aleman's father was perhaps the most powerful man in Cuba. Nominally minister of education, his most rewarding coup was to back a truck up to the Cuban treasury and make off with the republic's foreign reserves. In Miami, he bought up most of Key Biscayne.

His son chose a different path. Like Castro, he became a revolutionary against the Juan Batista re-

CUBA'S FIDEL CASTRO
Warned U.S. against aiding terrorists

gime in Cuba. While Castro was in the mountains, Aleman was helping to procure arms in Havana for the guerrillas. Aleman worked closely with Cubela, who was then one of the student revolutionaries at the University of Havana.

"There are many nasty things we had to do to bring on the revolution," Aleman reflects. The most difficult was the decision to kill Blanco Rico, Batista's chief of military intelligence. The revolutionary logic of that day called for sparing sadistic officials because of the hatred they aroused. "Rico treated everyone like a gentleman. He wouldn't even torture people," Aleman explains. So he had to be done away with.

The man assigned to kill him was Cubela.

In October 1956, Cubela shot Rico through the head in a fashionable Montmartre night club. As he died, Rico caught Cubela's eyes and, Cubela believed, smiled understandingly at him.

Cubela escaped to Miami, where he became a hero among Cuban exiles there.

Tortured by smile

But Cubela was tortured by the memory of Rico's dying smile. He was convinced that Rico was talking to him at night, and he had a nervous breakdown.

After a few months Cubela appeared to have recovered and returned to Cuba to join Castro in the Escambray mountains. Castro welcomed him with open arms.

Cubela had always been suspicious of Castro. But now Cubela was one of the towering figures of the revolution, with an independent following. Castro needed his support, and therefore made him head of the politically powerful federation of students at the university.

Cubela exalted in his new-found status as a triumphant revolutionary. He drove about Havana in a gigantic car, drinking and womanizing. He was blissful in his dissipation until he killed a woman in a car accident, and again began hearing Rico at night.

Aleman, now convinced that Castro was a Communist, had decided that Fidel had to die. He says that he went with another revolutionary to convince Cubela to take on the assignment.

"He was very upset when we came to him," says Aleman. "He said, 'I'm a nervous wreck. I'm just getting better, and now you want me to kill Castro. I don't see the Communists, but if I recover, maybe I will — I won't say yes. I won't say no."

Aleman was then paying for a psychiatrist for Cubela, and he persuaded the analyst to try to convince Cubela that the only way to exorcise the spectre of Rico was by assassinating Castro.

The man who accompanied Aleman was Jose (Pepin) Naranjo, an old revolutionary colleague who said he shared Aleman's mistrust of Castro. But not long after the meeting Castro made Naranjo his minister in charge of all police forces in Cuba.

The potential for a double-cross was obvious.

Manchurian candidate

In 1960, several months after talking to Cubela, Aleman went into exile in Miami. He could not trust Naranjo. He was to play no further role in Cubela's life. But Cubela himself had by then become a Manchurian candidate, at least vulnerable to the suggestion of killing Castro, but also a colossal security risk to whoever tried to tap his services, as of course he was being tapped by the CIA at the time of president John F. Kennedy's assassination.

In 1963, Cubela asked the CIA if he "could do something really significant for the creation of a new Cuba." he said he would like to plan Castro's "execution."

It was very shortly after this, on Sept. 7, 1973, that Castro summoned an associated Press reporter, Daniel Harker, to issue an extraordinary threat: "United States leaders should think that if they are aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe."

One possible explanation for the warning was the CIA's recent paramilitary activities in Cuba.

Operation Mongoose, the secret war that the United States waged against Cuba after the Bay of Pigs, was the product of president Kennedy and his brother, Attorney-general Robert Kennedy. It soon resulted in the establishment in Miami of the largest CIA station in the world — with an esitmated 400 American case officers and about 2,000 Cuban agents — charged with the sole task of detroying Castro.

But time after time, attempts to overthrow Castro failed.

To the frustrated CIA men running the Cuban secret war it must have seemed an acceptable risk to put up with Cubela's disturbed state of mind.

A meeting with Robert Kennedy and Cubela was set for Oct. 29. Kennedy did not attend, but Desmond FitzGerald, a social friend of the Kennedys and the CIA man in charge of the Cuban task force, did; he presented himself as Kennedy's personal representative. Cubela was apparently satisfied with FitzGerald's credentials, for the two arranged to meet in Paris again on Nov. 22, when FitzGerald was to give him an assassination device and to complete plans.

At the meeting that day, FitzGerald gave AM LASH a ballpoint pen rigged with a hypodermic needle the point of which was so fine that its victim would not notice the injection. According to a later CIA inspector general's report, "It is likely that at the very moment President Kennedy was shot, a CIA officer was meeting with a Cuban agent . . . and giving him an assassination device for use against Castro.

In a subsequent attempt on Castro's life, anti-Castro leader Manuel Artime, who faithfully reported all of his plans to his CIA control officer, provided Cubela with a silencer and some "small, highly concentrated explosives." The two men worked out elaborate arrangements for the murder of Castro.

Charged with treason

Artime, who led an army of Cuban exiles, was to land with his commandos as soon as Cubela struck. The assassination itself was to be carried out at Veradero Beach where Fidel was planning to spend the Easter holidays. Cubela stayed at a house close by; from there he planned to use the high-powered rifle. But, for some reason, Cubela wasn't able to complete his mission.

It was not until the beginning of 1966 that the

Cuban authorities got around to arresting Cubela. He was charged with treason, including the attempted assassination of Fidel Castro.

At his trial in 1966 Cubela called for the maximum sentence for himself — to be shot against the wall. But Castro himself intervened on Cubela's behalf to ask for clemency. The would-be assassin was sentenced to 25 years in prison but is now reported to be at a state rehabilitation farm.

"This fellow was nothing but a double agent," concluded Senator Robert Morgan (D—C.), a member of the intelligence committee who was briefed by William Colby, then CIA director, on the AM LASH plot but was told noting of Cubela's earlier history.

"When Colby told us we'd been meeting with AM LASH in Geneva, Paris and Madrid, it occurred to me, how could the guy get out of a little country like this so easily?

'Always a problem'

"Colby said he could do it because he was a high official. I asked Colby who he (Cubela) was really working for and Colby said, 'Senator, that's always a problem.' I was struck by how naive these people at the CIA seemed to have been."

But perhaps a more reasonable conclusion, based on Cubela's instability, is that, even if he were not a double agent, the Cubans were at least able to find out what he was conspiring to do.

Senator Morgan, after examining all the evidence, thinks Castro — after learning of Cubela's plotting — first tried to deter the CIA with his public warning. He then retaliated when he learned of Cubela's subsequent meeting with FitzGerald — now believing the Kennedys themselves were responsible.

"Just exactly how it happened I don't know and I don't know if we'll ever know," he said.

But the member of the Senate intelligence committee added: "There is no doubt in my mind that John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated by Fidel Castro or someone under his influence in retaliation for our efforts to assassinate him."

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PRESIDENT KENNEDY
Ran a secret war

WILLIAM COLBY
Never sure of loyalty